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Catering Equipment Guide

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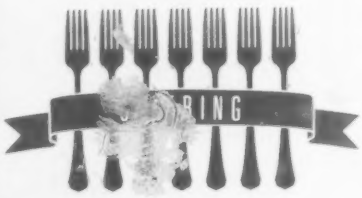

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14 R&I EXCLUSIVE: CASHING IN ON CATERING

Catering is on a roll—virtually everyone is doing it. Institutional and commercial operations, even fast-food units, are customizing services for special functions. Further efficiencies in purchasing and facility use—plus extra sales—are adding profits to a moving bottom line. Segment by segment, our Exclusive examines industry strategies to discover the how-tos of reaping catering's rewards.

39 INDEPENDENTS COME TO DEPEND ON CATERING DOLLARS

Menus, mobility, manpower and merchandising—independent restaurateurs share how these variables set catering ventures apart from day-to-day operation. Also addressed: the increase in drop-off catering and the importance of protecting your operation from liab[illegible]

26 HOTELS RUN THE WHOLE SHOW

Through the years, hotels have had a pretty firm grasp on the catering business. In fact, leaders in this segment report catering accounts for 45% or more of food and beverage sales. Now that more players are competing for available business, hotel caterers are using their experience to offer clients start-to-finish service and are moving off premises for a variety of special events.

75 CATERING IS AN IMPORTANT NEW CAMPUS CAPER

College administrators often judge a foodservice department by the quality of its catering program, whether it breaks even or generates extra revenue. The University of California at San Diego and the College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, Ill., have seen catering business grow well over six figures. Their success is based on three profitable ideas—service, service, service.

83 HOSPITAL CATERING EASES BUDGET PANGS

When hospitals today hold budget meetings, the typical foodservice operation contributes more than the coffee and doughnuts. Many have found new dollars as well as positive public relations by offering catering programs. Southwest General Hospital, Cleveland, is one example.

PRODUCT KNOW-HOW: Gouda cheese and peppers top off Very Gouda Pizza . . . 111

CATERING

CASHING IN ON CATERING

Operators across the industry position themselves to succeed and grow with a range of enterprising services.

Day by day, the foodservice market grows more crowded. Adding new units becomes more difficult. And the ability to squeeze every last dollar from existing operations grows more critical to the success of foodservice companies.

Across the industry, companies in search of added efficiency and incremental sales are turning to catering programs for help. And most are finding success. Sixty percent of those who offer catering say the business has grown dramatically over the past five years, according to a poll conducted in August by the Cahners Bureau of Foodservice Research.

Certainly, the recent recession has had an impact on the catering business. Since the downturn, operators report that customers are trading down and ordering closer to the event date. Clients are more apt to shop around for the best prices and service. And sales are harder to close.

Still, with innovative products and services, operators from all foodservice segments are finding new catering markets to tap. And some traditional lines of business—such as social catering—are proving surprisingly resilient. This year, the National Restaurant Association predicts sales by social caterers will rise more than 8%, almost three points higher than the industry as a whole.

BOX LUNCHES

The line between catering and delivery is blurring. A more frugal class of customers has prompted many operators to develop box lunches and cold platters that require limited or, in some cases, no service beyond drop-off.

At Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., catering sales have increased 15% in real terms, to about $750,000, over the past year.

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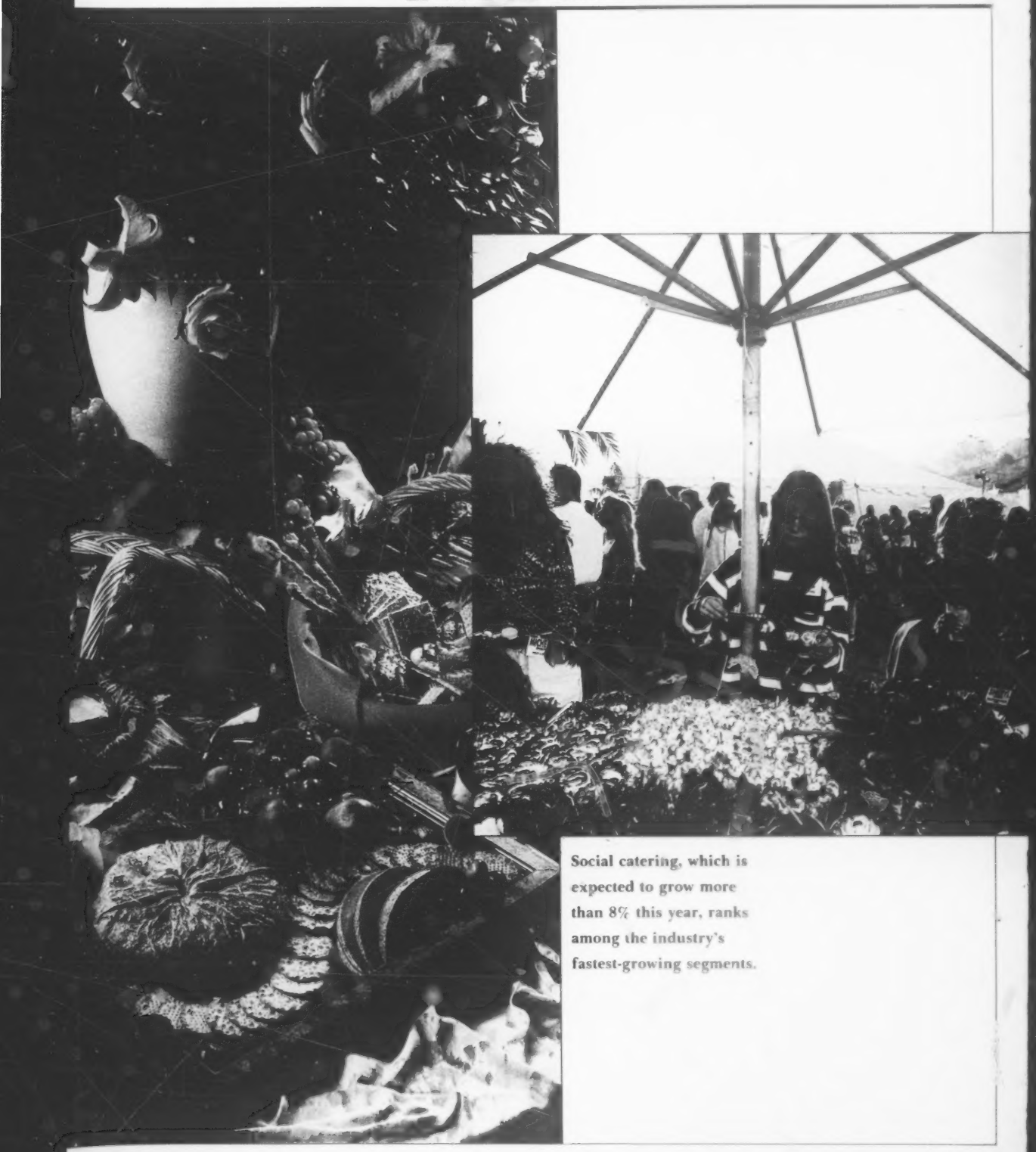
RESTAURANTS & INSTITUTIONS



Social catering, which is expected to grow more than 8% this year, ranks among the industry's fastest-growing segments.

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CATERING

Recessionary catering: Clients shop for price, trade down on menus, limit service.

continued from page 14

A major fund-raising drive has increased the number of alumni events on campus, boosting the catering business, while the school's foodservice department has launched a new drop-off platter program called "Frugal Caterer," which can accommodate customers with as little as $5 per person to spend.

"It's sort of a dichotomy," says Peg Lacey, director of dining services. "On one hand, we've got additional business coming in from the office of development and alumni affairs. On the other hand, there are many campus groups that we've done business with before that literally needed a different kind of service because they could not afford to have a waiter/waitress sit-down meal for some events."

"Because of the challenges higher education is facing right now, combined with the economy, I see continuing opportunities in the budget-platter area," she says.

At Creative Gourmets, a Boston-based catering operation owned by Trumbull, Conn.-based Gardner Merchant Food Services (formerly Trusthouse Forte), sales of midscale lunch bags, lunch boxes and party platters are taking off, especially to corporate clients that before the recession would have sponsored full-service functions.

Stephen Elmont, president of Creative Gourmets, predicts a sales increase of 15% to 20% for his Foods To Go program this year.

"We see a lot of people trading down from what would normally be a served function, a classic catering event," he says. "They use the Foods To Go as a trade-down. That's one of the reasons our sales are increasing."

The meals typically range in price from about $6.50 per person for a lunch bag containing a tuna-salad sandwich, chips and a piece of fruit to $12.95 for a Shrimp Mediterranean lunch box. Food costs as a percent of sales run in the low to mid-20s.

Elmont forecasts a 35% rise in his company's catering revenues for 1991, part of which will come from a midscale wedding facility the company recently purchased in Boston.

Like their more traditional counterparts in catering, many fast-food chains are well-positioned to exploit their economies of scale in the low-service, price-driven volume box-lunch business. Even chain operators who don't typically offer home delivery are cashing in on budget catering. Most concentrate on company picnics and kids birthday parties, but others compete for even higher-volume business.

In Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, Radames Matos, who franchises 18 Golden Skillet restaurants from International Dairy Queen, often bids for large government catering jobs.

He regularly supplies the National Guard and various youth programs with meals. For an event a few years ago, he prepared, delivered and served 32,000 box meals consisting of bone-in chicken, corn, biscuits, fruit salad and mashed potatoes.

Matos' restaurants close at 11 p.m., and he often works through the night, enlisting the help of all 18 of his restaurants, to prepare big orders.

The hot meals are packed 32 to a carton in insulated cases and delivered in trucks that are either borrowed from the government or rented.

Systemwide, fewer than half of Golden Skillet restaurants offer catering services, says IDQ Executive Vice President Ed Watson. But units that do typically derive 3% to 6% of their

CATERING CLIMBS

Almost 60% of those who offer catering say business has increased dramatically since 1986.

(% of operators reporting significantly more catering over the last five years)

Total	**58%**
Commercial	**56**
Institutional	**61**

Source: Cahners Bureau of Foodservice Research

revenue from catering, and those figures are on the rise. "I think consumption of anything away from home . . . these things are ever so much more popular than they were four or five years ago," he says.

MOBILE KITCHENS

Taking food to customers might not be regarded as revolutionary, but taking the kitchen to them is another matter.

Mobile kitchens have attracted much attention from operators who look upon them as portable a la carte restaurants. Today, however, the units are also gaining favor as catering kitchens.

ROC Management, a Godfather's Pizza franchisee based in Arnolds Park, Iowa, caters company picnics and other large functions using three mobile kitchens converted from horse trailers. At a Hormel company picnic last year, two trucks served 1,044 pizzas and 7,500 soft drinks to more than 9,000 attendees. "Aside from the tremendous promotion potential, these units can do more business than we can do in our stores even in a good week," says spokesman Russell Oechslin.

In Rochester, N.Y., restaurateur Lorraine Serpe bought a 65-foot trailer last year and spent more than $220,000 to convert it to a fully loaded mobile kitchen.

For a minimum fee of $5,000 a day, Lorraine's Coastal Catering truck follows music stars from city to city, feeding an average of 100 band and crew members per meal.

The truck sleeps seven, and Serpe says she usually brings a crew of five. She draws on her restaurant staff, paying each $100 a day on the road.

"There's a lot of caterers who don't want to do this because it's a 20-hour day," says Serpe. "But the money is terrific.

"Once promoters know who you are and they know the service, they'll pay for it. Maybe I'm a few dollars extra,

continued on page 20

Kitchen space often determines whether large-scale catering is viable.

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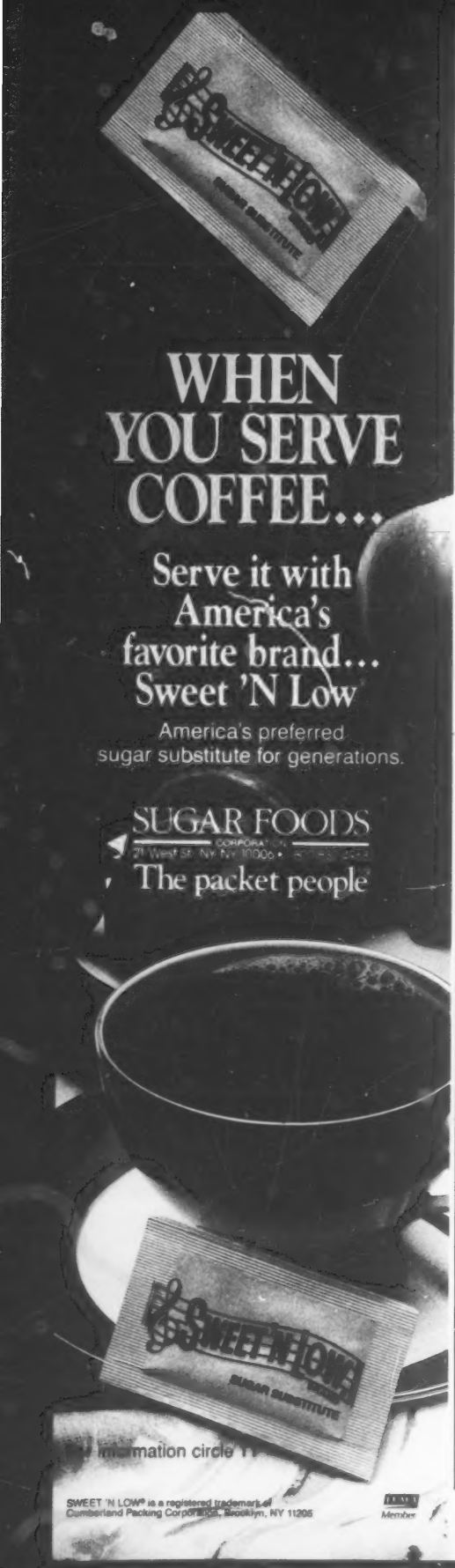

CATERING

Resourceful caterers scale services to accommodate their clients' needs.

continued from page 19

but to assure the promoters that they don't have to worry about anything, they'll go for it. They have to deal with people who won't go on stage unless they get what they want."

Serpe, who in her first month as a mobile caterer booked more than 20 days of work, says she hopes to branch out to provide foodservice on location for movies.

NOT FOR EVERYONE

Catering's rewards can be great. Food costs for catered events often are more than 10 percentage points lower than those for a la carte service. And the added sales from catering represent higher-profit dollars for many operations. Catering on a large scale helps create efficiencies in purchasing. When done well, it is a top promotional tool, and it can even help organizations like colleges and hospitals retain employees.

But catering is not for everyone. It requires extra labor. Operators must account for oft-overlooked costs, including higher utility bills and marketing charges. For off-premises events, food safety is more difficult to ensure, and some operators might require extra liability insurance. It calls for special packaging or holding and delivery equipment (see Catering Equipment article in this issue). Foods must travel well, and operators must have adequate space in their kitchens.

At the 38-seat Bistro at Maison de Ville, New Orleans, Executive Chef John Neal says he feels obligated to provide catering for guests of the hotel, but in general, he tries to avoid it. "I could do more catering—it's just too disruptive for the restaurant itself. I've got a kitchen here that will accommodate three cooks and a dishwasher, and if I have to prep a lot of hors d'oeuvres and other items while they're trying to set up their stations for the service, sometimes it can just be maddening."

Rick Chu, vice president of Ware, Mass.-based Debbie Wong Restaurants, says the five-unit chain does a substantial banquet business: At the restaurant he personally oversees, banquets account for about 15% of sales. Takeout also is a big business, but Chu does very little off-premises catering. "Chinese food is always best when it's fresh prepared. That's why we don't do much catering," he says.

INCREASED COMPETITION

Even for those who have the right products and capabilities to provide top-notch catering, the business is pressure-packed.

For example, the hotels and banquet halls that once had a lock on the upscale market now face competition from operators renting from museums, art galleries and other exciting spaces.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, whose foodservice outlets are run by Marriott Management Services, books events 270 nights a year.

From a low of about $25 per person to more than $40 per person, customers can dine surrounded by the exotic seascapes of the aquarium.

Catering accounts for half the account's annual food and beverage sales, more than double the percentage just five years ago.

For each event, the aquarium receives a rental fee and Marriott collects the food and beverage revenues. Such

CATERING CUM LAUDE

Fully 90% of colleges say they cater, the highest incidence of any foodservice segment.

(% of operations offering catering)

Commercial total	**45%**
Hotels/motels	55
Full-service restaurants	40
Fast food restaurants	40
Institutional total	**58%**
Colleges	90
Hospitals	50
Employee feeding	50
Schools	40

Source: Cahners Bureau of Foodservice Research

client-contractor synergies are fueling a boom in catering within the contract segment.

"Because of the economy, everybody is being extremely competitive," says Elmont. Clients today are more likely to ask operators to bid for catering business, "which never used to happen," he says. At the same time, the trend toward comparison shopping means caterers are serving more sample meals to potential customers—frequently to large committees—while making fewer actual sales. As a result, operators face a dilemma: How to offset the often high cost of tastings without chasing away business. After all, sample meals are regarded as an important tool for promoting a company's food and service.

Heightened cost pressures make the decision easier: A growing number of operators require a deposit from clients before holding free tastings. Others agree to bill customers at wholesale rates if they get the job and at full retail if they don't.

NEW MARKETS

But competition is nothing new to the foodservice industry, and like Serpe, entrepreneurial operators from all corners of the industry are discovering new catering markets.

In Fargo, N.D., restaurant operator Peter Haug adds an extra $250,000 to his top line each year by preparing in-flight meals for United Airlines. The airline guarantees him a 12% profit.

Haug's crew prepares the meals to airline specs in the kitchen of his Barnstormer restaurant at Hector International Airport.

In spring, American Airlines also will begin flying into Hector. "We should be doing two flights a day for them too," says Haug.

While many operators are reaping the benefits of catering programs, perhaps nowhere does the cash from new opportunities find better use than at the nation's hard-pressed public schools.

At the Detroit Public Schools, administrators plan to use existing capacity in their base kitchens to supply meals to local private schools.

Henrietta Moore, director of foodservice, says she believes the new catering program will generate revenue for upgrading the school system's cash registers and other hardware, boost its buying power, and allow it to add more fresh produce to its menus.

"It's a natural extension of our satellite program," says Moore. "It's something that we've had inquiries about for the last couple years."

Detroit has 20 base kitchens, each of which currently serves eight to 10 schools.

"We're prepared to deliver the food and the service," Moore says.

—Rajan Chaudhry

Easy-to-serve platters are among the most popular items with price-conscious consumers.

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